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C O N F I D E N T I A L KATHMANDU 000235

DEPT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR PTER IN NP

SUBJECT: MAOIST DEFENSE MINISTER REFUSES TO EXTEND SERVICE TERM OF EIGHT GENERALS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR NANCY J. POWELL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. This is an action request. See paragraph 9.

Summary

¶2. (C) The Nepalese Defense Minister refused to approve term extensions for eight brigadier generals of the Nepal Army and the officers were forced into mandatory retirement at midnight, March 16, 2009. Many opine that the Defense Minister is attempting to assert his control over the Nepal Army. (Note: Much of the content of this cable was first published as IIR 6 867 0088 09, but due to a messaging glitch, did not disseminate to all addresses).

Eight Brigadiers Automatically Retired

¶3. (C) According to Embassy sources, the Defense Minister, Ram Bahadur Thapa, who is a Maoist, refused to approve term extensions for eight brigadier generals of the Nepal Army (NA). As of midnight, March 16, 2009, these generals were automatically retired. Six of the eight are war college graduates, having attended a war college in the U.S., UK, China, India or Pakistan. War college attendance is a prerequisite for promotion to Major General. The Ministry of Defense gave no reason for refusing to extend the generals in the official letters it issued March 19 denying the extensions. (Note: Brigadier Generals have an initial term of four years and can be extended by another three years, for a total of seven years. Depending on the availability of open major general positions, a qualified brigadier general can expect to be promoted sometime between three and seven years. These eight officers were at their four-year mark as brigadiers. End Note)

¶4. (U) The Brigadier Generals affected are: Nara Bahadur Kandel, Commandant of the Military Academy; Narendra Rawal, Commandant of NA Staff College; Kumar Budathoki, Director of Welfare; Pawan Pande, Director of Military Intelligence; Pradeep Rana, Director of Research and Development; Shiva Poudel, Director of Artillery; Ramesh Bista, Commandant Military School; and Raju Pratap KC, Chief of Staff of the (Kathmandu) Valley Division. Pande is a 2008 graduate of the National War College.

Efforts To Reverse Decision Unsuccessful

¶5. (C) During the week of March 16-20, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Rookmangud Katawal held internal meetings with his Primary Staff Officers and retired Generals on the issue.

He also called on President Ram Baran Yadav, and met briefly with Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Dahal, as well as key members of the opposition Nepali Congress (NC), and of the two other major parties in the governing coalition) the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML) and the Madhesi People,s Rights Forum (MPRF) -- to attempt to get the decision overturned. The COAS has instructed the generals in question to continue reporting to duty in civilian clothes for the time being.

¶6. (C) President Yadav was reportedly very upset about the situation, but urged the Chief to talk to the government.

(Note: As President, Yadav is the supreme commander of the Nepal Army. End note.) Former Prime Minister G.P. Koirala issued a strong statement in favor of the generals on March

¶16. The President of the UML, Jhalanath Khanal, and the MPRF also spoke out in the press against the government,s decision. After convening a meeting on March 18 with the seven largest political parties, former Prime Minister G.P. Koirala met with Prime Minister Dahal on March 19 and asked that the decision be overturned. Media reports state that the Prime Minister told Koirala the Defense Minister,s decision would stand.

Why the Defense Minister Refused the Extensions

¶7. (C) Embassy contacts opine that the Defense Minister refused to extend the service terms in an attempt to reassert civilian control over the NA after his serious dispute with COAS Katawal, over the recently completed recruitment process in the NA. Others opine that this is a clear sign that the Maoists want to gut the NA and thereby destabilize Nepal,s democratic system. Press reports allege that the Maoist Central Committee and the seven division commanders of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA)--who were in Kathmandu for meetings when the decision was made--pressured Minister Badal into his decision. (Comment: Exactly how the decision was made is unclear, but the Maoist leaders, including Prime Minister Dahal, are now speaking with one voice saying the decision will not be overturned.) Possible reasons behind the Defense Minister's refusal are: To reassert civilian control over the NA; to destabilize and weaken the NA; to politicize the NA; as revenge for the recruitment standoff; succumbing to pressure from PLA leaders and party; lack of concern for movement on the peace process; and lastly, a plan devised by the number two in the NA, Lieutenant General Kul Khadka, to provoke the COAS and hasten his removal allowing Khadka to become COAS.

India,s Position

¶8. (C) The Ambassador discussed the development with the Indian Ambassador on March 20. Ambassador Sood met PM Dahal on March 17 to express concerns about the impact of the decision on the peace process. Dahal provided a lengthy and not totally plausible explanation of the chain of events around the decision. At that time he appeared to be considering extending some of the generals but according to Sood's contacts, has now drawn a red line and will not consider any compromise. Sood did not believe the other parties could create enough pressure to reverse the decision.

He had no plans to see the PM again.

Proposed Talking Points

¶9. (C) Ambassador seeks approval to use the following outline with the Prime Minister. An appointment could occur as early as Sunday, therefore please pass a clearance message through the unclassified system over the weekend.

--Considering the sensitivities surrounding the peace process, this step seems very ill-advised. We are concerned that other members of the Army Integration Special Committee will take this decision as a sign of poor faith, limiting the possibility of any progress on integration and rehabilitation and the peace process generally.

--We would like to understand better how this decision was made.

--The U.S. is concerned about the impact on the Army's participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Our strong support for Nepal's role is based on the Nepal Army's professionalism of its officer corps. This decision eliminates professional officers with a breadth of UNPKO experience.

Comment

¶10. (C) Post is very concerned about the impact of this apparently arbitrary retirement of these senior officers on the peace process and the NA. The move is certain to exacerbate tensions between the parties and with key issues involving military integration and the fate of the Maoist army looming, refusal to consider strong opposition to the move could prove a dangerous development for Nepal's peace process. The dismissal without cause sends the message to the Army that professional military education and experience are no longer the determining factors for upward progression in the Army. Of particular concern is the dismissal of Brig Gen Pawan Pande*a 2008 graduate of the U.S. National War College*who is considered one of the best officers in the NA and a possible future COAS.

POWELL